

Internal Political Struggles in Iran and their Impact on Foreign Policy

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The Iranian political system has never been monolithic. It has always featured ideological splits and struggles, both institutional and personal. As in other countries, these struggles have a major impact on how foreign policy is shaped, even though Iran is not a democratic country.

The division in the internal political theater in Iran in recent years can be described in two ways. A prevalent approach in Iranian discourse distinguishes between those who emphasize the republican foundation – or the role of the people – in the Islamic Republic, and those who emphasize the Islamic element, which gives clerics absolute control and reduces the role of the people to obedience to the clerics. The republicans, led by President Hassan Rouhani, come mainly from the ranks of the elected institutions in the political system, in other words, the government and the Majlis (parliament). The Islamists, on the other hand, represent the leading trend among the clerics. They are led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Revolutionary Guards, and the Basij militia.

However, this short essay uses the older definition that distinguishes between reformists and conservatives, because the struggle between the two groups is broader than just the issues of democracy and religion. It also encompasses economic policy – recognition of the need for substantial economic reforms versus a vision of the “resistance economy” – and the link between the economy and foreign policy; a dispute about the degree of openness to the external world that is desirable for Iran; and the extent

of Iran's involvement in regional conflicts. Both sides are part of the ruling establishment, both want to guarantee the survival of the current regime in the long term, and both seek to promote Iran's standing as a regional power. They disagree, however, on two important questions: which is the most significant threat to the regime, and what is the best way of safeguarding Iran's strategic goals.

Reformists and Conservatives

President Rouhani, regarded as the pragmatist closest to the reformist movement, is a veteran politician who previously served in a number of senior security roles, most notably as first secretary of the Supreme National Security Council in 1989-2005. In other words, he is not an intellectual, as was former President Mohammad Khatami. He is less interested in cultural issues, questions about the essence of Islamic democracy, and a dialogue between civilizations, which were of great interest to reformist President Khatami, although he is not indifferent to such matters. He is highly concerned, however, by the severe weaknesses of the Iranian system. In a speech before senior officers of the Revolutionary Guards in September 2015, he came close to heresy when he declared, "Today, the main enemy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is not America and Israel, rather it is unemployment, inflation, sandstorms, lack of water and the environmental disaster facing the country."¹ The response by one of the Revolutionary Guard commanders that Rouhani was more dangerous than the Mujahedin-e-Khalq terrorist organization, which is as an anathema in Iranian discourse, highlights the subversive dimension of Rouhani's speech.²

In other words, the reformists and Rouhani believe that in order to deal with the challenges before it, Iran must open itself to the world, so that it will attract investments. This means a more conciliatory foreign policy, at least at the tactical level. It is clear to them that openness to the world requires economic changes within Iran that will affect the domestic structures of power. Some of the reformists may also wish to encourage a degree of political openness, but this is assigned a lower priority than economic reform. They are also aware of their limited ability to generate political liberalization, given the great sensitivity of the Supreme Leader on this issue, which effectively neutralized Khatami during his second term as president in 2001-2005.

As Khamenei and the conservatives see it, the true threat to Iran is twofold: the external threat of the West, led by the United States; and the internal threat, led by the weakening of religious and revolutionary fervor within the public, especially among young people. Khamenei's speeches and statements during his long term as Supreme Leader are replete with warnings as to the plots and threats against Iran by the "enemy," identified first and foremost with the West. Yet he is not worried about a military invasion by the United States but by what he calls the "soft war" and the cultural offensive (*tahajom-e farhangi*) against Iran by the West, conducted in order to overthrow the Islamic Republic from within. This offensive is especially dangerous because of the seductive attraction of Western culture, which also endangers the believers' soul, since for believers, spiritual corruption is more dangerous than physical danger.³ The conservatives are determined to preserve the political and cultural status quo in Iran, believing that any openness to the outside jeopardizes the regime. They well remember the processes led by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, which culminated in the Soviet Union's downfall.

The Economic Factor

The Revolutionary Guards and the Basij militia want to preserve the economic empires they have built over the past 20 years. These empires, which control substantial sectors of the Iranian economy, directly and indirectly employ millions of Iranians, and therefore constitute a very powerful political instrument. The Revolutionary Guards and Basij militia fear that opening the economy to the world will harm their economic interests, because they have developed a "black" economic system for circumventing the sanctions imposed on Iran. They are also worried that the corporations that they dominate will be unable to compete against foreign companies, and will be obliged to comply with the rules of proper administration, which will detract from the political benefit that they confer.

For the reformists, the nuclear agreement concluded in July 2014 is essential for rebuilding the Iranian economy, because it is designed to open up Iran to massive foreign investments, first and foremost in the oil sector, but also in industry and infrastructure. Indeed, in the first year following the implementation of the agreement, hundreds of leading businesspeople from all over the world came to Iran and signed tentative investment agreements. So far, however, most of these agreements have not been carried out because

of various obstacles, described below. For their part, the conservatives regard these investments as a threat to the regime, because they realize that they will be followed by what is necessarily a negative cultural influence from the West. As an alternative, Khamenei raised the vision of a resistance economy, a self-sufficient economy that does not depend on imports from other countries. In other words, the conservatives are willing to pay a heavy economic price, as long as Iran retains its revolutionary purity or, to put it more cynically, they are willing to thwart necessary economic reforms, as long as their political interests are maintained.⁴

Rouhani sought to loosen the Revolutionary Guards' grip on the economy, and also tried to induce them to adopt his attitude towards foreign investments. He offered the Revolutionary Guards a significant share of the contracts signed with foreign investors, thereby enabling them to benefit from the anticipated economic prosperity, if they accept the change. At the same time, he warned that the alternative to the nuclear agreement was escalation to a war against the US. At present, however, it appears that the Revolutionary Guard commanders prefer the status quo to the economic and political risk incurred by opening Iran to the world.⁵

Conservatives against Rouhani

The Revolutionary Guards and the media associated with them often use the term “nofuzi” to describe Rouhani and his supporters, meaning agents of foreign influence who are determined to change the regime's revolutionary character. Revolutionary Guards commander 'Ali Jafari even publicly cast doubt on Rouhani's loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Nor do the Revolutionary Guards confine themselves to words. They have staged deliberate provocations in order to sabotage Rouhani's efforts to achieve a thaw with the West. For example, they arrested a number of Iranians with dual citizenship, conducted military maneuvers at diplomatically sensitive moments, initiated provocative contact with US naval vessels in the Persian Gulf, and leaked embarrassing details about the nuclear agreement that have strengthened the agreement's opponents in the US.⁶

Khamenei has never abandoned his hostile and suspicious attitude toward the West. He encourages rivalry between the Revolutionary Guards and Rouhani, which helps him maintain his position as the supreme decision maker in the Iranian system. In addition, he has always objected to strong presidents, fearing their independent conduct. It is therefore reasonable to

assume that he backed the Revolutionary Guards' provocations in order to put Rouhani in his place.

A glaring manifestation of the dispute between the priority of economic development versus an ideological siege approach was the storm that broke following a speech by former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who died in January 2017. In his speech at an educational conference in August 2016, Rafsanjani hailed Germany and Japan, saying that they rebuilt their economy after WWII, thanks to investing their capital in scientific innovation instead of in the military, and expressed hope that Rouhani would pursue a similar course in Iran. In response, the conservative media accused him of seeking to weaken and even completely dismantle Iran's military power. They stated that by following Rafsanjani's recommendations, Iran would lose its independence and revert to being an American satellite.⁷ Khamenei joined the dispute when he attacked Rafsanjani in a speech to the Revolutionary Guards in September 2016, for distorting the principles of the revolution, and for actually seeking to destroy its achievements. He contended that Rafsanjani was prepared to subject Iran again to the Western world order and have it adopt a Western way of life, ostensibly in order to end Iran's diplomatic isolation and integrate it in the international community.⁸

The nuclear agreement, Rouhani's most important foreign policy achievement, which was intended to serve as a lever to push the Iranian economy forward, has had only a limited impact so far. Thanks to the nuclear agreement and the removal of a significant part of the sanctions imposed on Iran, the Iranian economy registered growth, mainly in oil exports, which have doubled, but less than the Iranians had hoped for. Even before US President Donald Trump took office, investors were deterred from carrying out the investment plans they had signed, due to international restrictions on the Iranian banking system and the structural flaws of the Iranian economy: excessive bureaucracy, corruption, and politicization.

The Test of Banking Reform

A good example that highlights the link between the political struggles, the economy, and foreign policy is banking reform. The banks in Iran are afflicted with a series of acute structural problems, the biggest of which was isolation from the SWIFT international clearance system as a result of the sanctions imposed over the nuclear issue. In addition, the Iranian banks have suffered from poor management caused by the subordination of

economic considerations to political ones, particularly toxic loans for populist projects with no chance of ever returning the investment. Thus, the Iranian Central Bank, the Iranian equivalent of the Bank of Israel, estimated that the Iranian government owed the banks \$33 billion. This debt will probably not be repaid, meaning that the banks' true equity is substantially lower than their declared equity, and some of them may suffer large equity deficits. One reflection of the banking system's weakness was the 37.5 percent plunge in the share price of Bank Mellat on January 24, 2017, after the bank had to adapt its accounting and reporting system to the prevailing standards in the international system, and the adjustment revealed the extent of its equity deficit.⁹

One of the preconditions for reintegrating the Iranian banks in the international financial system is accepting the terms of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international agency founded in 1989 in order to combat money laundering by banks and the aid to criminal and terrorist organizations. Iran has been included in the FATF blacklist since 2008. Rouhani hoped that the nuclear agreement would free the Iranian banking system from the restrictions imposed on it, and reached an agreement with FATF whereby Iran would abide by the rules set by the organization. In April 2016, the Majlis passed a law forbidding financing of terrorist organizations and a law banning money laundering. In exchange, Iran was reintegrated in the SWIFT system, and the FATF report dated June 2016 announced the suspension of all sanctions against Iran for 12 months, and extended the suspension in February 2018. The report, however, also called for governments to warn their banks about the risk of doing business with Iran, because it was not yet meeting the terms of the agreement, in part because of the aid it provides to Hamas and Hezbollah, which are on the list of terrorist organizations compiled by the United States and the European Union.¹⁰ This declaration means that if Iran does not change its policy on these matters, the banking sanctions will be reinstituted. International banks will refuse to work with Iranian banks, and the hope for a massive stream of capital into Iran will suffer a severe setback.

The conservatives realized the opportunity to harm Rouhani, and the significance of the FATF terms for Iran's foreign policy. They have accused Rouhani of treason, and have warned that implementing FATF principles would force Iran to concede its sovereignty. They have also asserted that these principles contravene Islamic religious laws, and have threatened to appeal

to the Iranian Supreme Court, the Supreme National Security Council, the Prosecutor-General, and the Majlis in order to stop Rouhani from acceding to the demands. They have also denied the obvious meaning of signing the agreement – that the Iranian banks have engaged in money laundering, and have transferred funds to terrorist organizations.¹¹ The conservative newspaper *Javan*, for instance, claimed that one of FATF's objectives was to weaken Iran, and especially to damage the Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad. The newspaper asserted that by signing the agreements, Iran had accepted the Western classification of the Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations, while they were actually liberation organizations.¹² Rouhani argued that Iran had no alternative but to accept the FATF terms.

Another problem was the direct consequences of the banking sanctions against the Revolutionary Guards, and the personal sanctions against its senior officers. Iranian compliance with the agreements will have a detrimental effect on the Revolutionary Guards' economic empire, and will force the Guards to find other ways of transferring large sums of money to terrorist organizations outside Iran. In September 2016, Rouhani won a partial victory when two large banks, Sepah and Melli, announced that they would no longer work with the Khatem al-Anbiya company, the Revolutionary Guards' major holding company, so they would not be subject to sanctions.¹³ In line with his usual practice, Khamenei positioned himself between the two sides. His senior foreign policy advisor, 'Ali Akbar Velayati, stated that Iran should not sign the undertakings, and portrayed Khamenei as adhering to revolutionary purity. Khamenei himself made no public statement, thereby enabling Rouhani to continue his struggle for the agreement.¹⁴

The FATF issue, however, reflects a deeper question, namely, whether Iran is willing to accept the rules of the game in the international system. In other words, the question is whether Iran is willing to undergo a process of normalization, as urged by the reformists, or to continue to adhere to the revolutionary approach advocated by the conservatives, which regards these rules and the systems of international law as an expression of the distorted balance of international power that perpetuates Western hegemony. The question of the degree to which Iran is willing to make these economic changes in the coming years may serve as a good measure of the extent of its willingness to fulfill a constructive role in the international system.

Foreign Relations and Internal Political Wrangling

Another expression of the political split is the conservatives' effort to thwart Rouhani's conciliatory policy toward Iran's neighbors, driven by the desire to undermine him at every opportunity, and perhaps also in the realization by the Revolutionary Guards that a confrontationist posture in foreign policy strengthens their political standing inside Iran.

One prominent example of this phenomenon is Rouhani's effort to lower the level of hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, and the Revolutionary Guards' determination to exacerbate this tension.¹⁵ There are also reports that Rouhani is interested in cutting back Iranian involvement in Syria because of the heavy burden it constitutes for the Iranian economy.

The conservatives, on the other hand, make many provocative statements against Iran's rivals, partly in order to embarrass Rouhani and portray him as a weakling vis-à-vis Iran's enemies. For example, Alireza Zakani, a conservative member of the Majlis, boasted two years ago that Iran controlled four Arab capitals. Former Basij commander Yahya Rahim Safavi declared in May 2014 that Iran's real border extended to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and southern Lebanon. Similarly, Revolutionary Guards Brigadier General Hossein Salami boasted that while formerly Iran fought the enemy on the border on the banks of the Karkheh River, i.e., in the Khuzestan area, it has now extended its strategic border in the war against its enemies to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and North Africa.¹⁶ These statements can be regarded as an expression of self-confidence, far reaching regional ambitions, and part of the internal debate in response to those who think that the aid to Assad is becoming too expensive.

The conservatives have also used relations with Saudi Arabia as a tool for taunting Rouhani. Beyond the strategic and religious rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, bilateral relations between the two countries have deteriorated over the past two years, with diplomatic relations severed following several events – one of them being the execution in Saudi Arabia of Shiite Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr on January 2, 2016, which sparked severe Iranian responses. Khamenei threatened grave consequences in response to the execution, and said that Saudi Arabia would suffer from divine wrath. Despite the extreme tone of the response, however, leaving punishment in the hands of God was designed to exempt Iran from the moral duty to avenge Sheikh Nimr's blood.

The popular response in Iran to the execution included the burning of buildings in the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the offices of the Saudi consulate in Mashad. Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries responded by severing the diplomatic relations with Iran. There are many indications that this “spontaneous mass rage” was organized by conservative groups wishing to embarrass Rouhani. This did not, however, prevent the conservative media from attacking Rouhani by alleging that his weak policy had encouraged Saudi Arabia to adopt tough aggressive measures, and that this policy had aroused the justified anger of the Iranian public. They argued that had Rouhani taken a more assertive stand against Saudi Arabia, this regrettable event would not have taken place. In other words, Rouhani was to blame for the violent behavior of his opponents.

A similar pattern occurred before the 2016 elections in the US. Like certain groups in Israel, the conservatives in Iran preferred Trump to Clinton, under the assumption that his hostility would destroy the chances of improving relations with the US and prevent the penetration of destructive American cultural influence in Iran, thereby harming the reformists, who sought better relations with the US. They likewise hoped that Trump’s policies would isolate the US in the international arena. The economic price for Iran was less important to them than the political gain.

Trump fulfilled some of the conservatives’ expectations with his order barring Iranian citizens from entering the US, and the statement by then-US National Security Advisor Michael Flynn that Iran was “on notice.” Khamenei attacked the US, saying that it had revealed its true face, and it had again been proven that the Americans could not be trusted, because they had not abandoned their hostile attitude toward Iran and Islam. Criticism was also directed against Rouhani for his naivete in believing the Americans and his willingness to compromise with them.

The missile tests carried out by the Revolutionary Guards in 2017 were designed to present a belligerent and challenging stance to Trump, and to establish Iran’s red lines by delivering the message that the nuclear agreement would not affect continued missile development. The tests were also a measure by the Revolutionary Guards, with Khamenei’s approval, designed to put Rouhani on the spot and force him to either confront the US or risk criticism from Khamenei. The conservatives excel in such provocations, as evidenced by the arrest of 13 Jews as spies in 1999, which was aimed at posing a similar problem to then-President Khatami.

Conservative spokesmen complained that Iran had paid dearly for Rouhani's excessive dabbling with the Americans, because he had not respected the red lines set by the Supreme Leader on the nuclear issue and had made excessive concessions in the nuclear agreement.¹⁷ A February 4, 2017 editorial by the conservative newspaper *Vatan-e Emrooz*, for example, asserted that Trump's very presence in the White House was a blow to those who believed in developing ties with the West. The newspaper explained that the reformists would be unable to win the presidential elections by creating a false dichotomy between peace and conflict, and between improvement of the economic situation and consolidation of a resistance economy.¹⁸ The important point here is that alongside their criticism, the conservatives, including Khamenei, are claiming that Trump's rhetoric need not be taken too seriously, and that there is no risk of the United States attacking Iran.

Hossein Shariatmadari, the hard line conservative editor of *Kayhan*, attacked Trump from the opposite direction – for not keeping his election pledge to annul the nuclear agreement. Shariatmadari called the agreement a “golden document” for the US, while saying that there was nothing for Iran in it other than loss and humiliation. He added, however, that Trump had unfortunately come to his senses and realized that his friends in the White House had cheated and defrauded Iran in this agreement, and that he therefore now wishes to preserve it.¹⁹ It is clear from this context who was to blame for such a terrible agreement for Iran.

The Presidential Elections: The Reformists' Limited Victory

The Iranian presidential elections on May 19, 2017 highlighted the close connection between internal politics and foreign policy. Rouhani emphasized the positive contribution of the nuclear agreement to Iran's economy, thanks to the removal of most of the sanctions imposed on Iran, and the elimination of the risk of war hanging over Iran. He also pledged to take action to remove those other sanctions that had not yet been removed. Rouhani took a more critical and daring line against the conservatives as election day approached. He quoted the instructions of Islamic Republic founder Ayatollah Khomeini forbidding the Revolutionary Guards to intervene in politics and control various communications media.²⁰ Prominent conservative candidate Ebrahim Raisi, on the other hand, who headed Astan Quds Razavi, the wealthiest Muslim waqf in Iran, and possibly in the entire Muslim world, attacked Rouhani for his failure to deal with Iran's difficult economic problems.

He said that this failure refuted Rouhani's promises about the economic benefit of the nuclear agreement. As an alternative, Raisi asserted that foreign policy should serve the resistance economy vision, but at the same time made demagogic promises of a generous distribution of funds by the government, without explaining where the enormous sum necessary to fund his promises would come from.²¹ Supreme Leader Khamenei, who ostensibly remained neutral in the elections, expressed indirect support for Raisi when he publicly denied Rouhani's claim that the nuclear agreement had prevented a military threat to Iran, and asserted that the determination of the Iranian people had prevented war.²²

Rouhani's convincing victory with a 57 percent majority of the voters reflects the desire of most Iranians for more economic and cultural openness to the world, and their support for a more moderate foreign policy that will make such a policy possible. On the other hand, Raisi's relative achievement reveals two phenomena: the continued existence of a stratum of devout regime supporters (around 30 percent, taking into account the figures from all of the recent election campaigns), and the appeal of Raisi's populist promises among the economically disadvantaged groups, which have thus far not enjoyed any benefits from openness to the world. Despite their failure, the conservatives have made it clear that they do not intend to allow Rouhani to go ahead with his policy. Shariatmadari attacked Rouhani for his conciliatory policy toward the United States and its Arab allies, and said that Rouhani's attacks against the Revolutionary Guards encouraged Trump and the Arab Gulf states to issue a series of declarations against Iran, hinting that Rouhani's remarks had demonstrated weakness and subversion of the basic principles of the regime.²³ Shariatmadari thereby closely linked Iran's foreign and internal policies.

At first glance, Rouhani's victory has limited significance for Iranian foreign policy, because policy is determined by the Supreme Leader based on an array of strategic, ideological, and personal considerations and constraints. At the same time, its significance for the various forces trying to influence the shaping of foreign policy cannot be completely discounted; the line represented by Rouhani does have some impact. It appears that the Iranian leadership will find it very difficult to ignore the clear message delivered by the majority of the Iranian people. Even if no significant change takes place in Iranian foreign policy, the Iranian leadership lacks popular backing for

a reckless and injudicious foreign policy, and it can be hoped or assumed that this will constitute a restraining factor on Iran's policy.

Notes

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